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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000235

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: AN NGO HOSTAGE NEGOTIATOR'S TALE

REF: LAGOS 226

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for Reason 1.4 (D) and (E)
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SUMMARY

1. (C) In a recent meeting with Poloff, Ledum Mitee, President of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), described his role in the recent Delta hostage crisis involving four oil service company workers, including one Amcit. Mitee described the kidnappers as well-armed and surprisingly professional in conduct. He feared they constitute a new threat to peace in the Delta that civil society's nonviolent approach may not be able to contain. Mitee said the hostages were ultimately freed to Bayelsa State Governor Goodluck Jonathan after he offered 100 million naira. Mitee said he has been unable to persuade Rivers State Governor Peter Odili to take new steps to reduce the threat through new jobs or other developmental programs. In the absence of any sign of economic development reform from the GON, the kidnappers told Mitee they would launch new attacks. End summary.

MOSOP LEADER CALLED IN TO NEGOTIATE

2. (C) In an early February meeting with Poloff, Ledum Mitee, President of MOSOP, recounted his experience helping to mediate the recent hostage crisis in the Niger Delta. Mitee said he was asked to mediate by the kidnappers, who did not want to negotiate directly with government. He agreed to assist in hopes of bringing about a nonviolent resolution and of staving future attacks. First, Mitee was called to a meeting with two of the kidnappers where he was warned not to divulge information about them nor attempt to bring in any government security forces. This meeting occurred in a public area of a Warri hotel. Mitee recognized a Nigerian Army officer acquaintance at the location; upon speaking to the officer, Mitee learned the officer was aware the two men were involved in the kidnapping, yet the officer did nothing to impede the duo.

3. (C) Mitee described a trip of two to three hours along the coastal shore and through the creeks to reach the kidnappers' camp, at times maneuvering in creek channels barely wide enough for boats to pass. On the way Mitee reported seeing groups of bivouacked soldiers. The kidnappers simply paid the soldiers two hundred naira (1.50 USD) at each point for unmolested passage. Upon arrival the kidnappers performed a traditional ritual to ensure Mitee's sincerity. (Comment: Performance of the ritual meshes with accounts of militia groups' adherence to traditional ethnic practices, including "juju" protection from injury by their adversary's weapons. End comment.) Mitee described an encampment protected by five to ten machine gun emplacements, and approximately 300 men armed with automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades. In conversations with various leaders of the group, Mitee learned that a substantial number of the men lived in Port Harcourt, while others lived in Warri, with both sets deploying to the creeks only when an operation was launched.

A DISCIPLINED, DETERMINED MILITIA FORCE

4. (C) Mitee said the group appeared well-trained. When he commented to one of the leaders about the group's discipline, Mitee was told some were trained by Nigerian Army personnel. The leaders were sophisticated in their precautions with communications, said Mitee, possessing thirty to forty mobile phones and discarding them after use if there was concern their security had been compromised.

5. (C) Mitee used his opportunity to speak to the gang leaders to dissuade them from violence. The leaders replied that local elders had warned them not to harm the hostages,

but said attacks and taking hostages were the only tactics that achieved results with the GON and oil companies. They warned about additional operations if the federal government did not take substantive action to develop the Delta. They said they would wait only a few weeks for the GON to act.

16. (C) Mitee asked the leaders to allow more time, as changing GON policy would take time. When Mitee asked what additional attacks were planned, the leaders boasted they might attack Abuja, and could procure an aircraft to make this possible. They named Port Harcourt as another near-term target, saying a substantial amount of arms and ammunition had already been transferred to the Rivers State capital in preparation to strike if the GON did not act as directed.

LAST MINUTE PAY-OFF: THE RELEASE CONDITIONS

17. (C) Mitee said the group held fast to their demands, the release of Dokubo Asari and Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, amnesty for the kidnappers, and improvements for the people living in the Niger Delta. He said they did not raise the issue of ransom money, until he was abruptly informed the hostages would not be turned over to him after all. At that point, the leaders informed a perplexed Mitee that Bayelsa Governor Goodluck Jonathan offered 100 million naira. After some internal dispute about the money, they accepted Bayelsa's largesse. The kidnappers told Mitee they would use the 100 million naira to purchase longer-range weapons.

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POSTSCRIPT: MEETING WITH RIVERS' GOVERNOR
ODILI AND A FOLLOW-UP CALL FROM THE KIDNAPPERS

18. (C) After his return from the creeks, Mitee said he visited Rivers State Governor Peter Odili to relay his concern over the increased threat this disciplined, disenchanting group posed, pleading that a substantial employment program was needed to give the militia members legitimate avenues for their energy. Unfortunately, Odili did not see the need for a new tack in the Delta, stating that extant programs would suffice.

19. (C) Mitee concluded his account by describing a follow-up call from the kidnappers on Saturday, February 4, four days after the hostages were released, in which the kidnappers first chided Mitee for providing his story to the media, and then threatened to launch additional attacks because the government policies toward the Delta showed no change. Mitee argued against violence and pleaded for the group to allow the GON to understand the new danger and move new policy forward.

COMMENT

10. (C) Much of what Mitee stated conforms with what we heard from NDDC director Timi Alaibe (reftel). That is not surprising as the two men worked closely together during the hostage taking. Thus, to a large degree they echo one another and much of what they say comes from the same sources. However, this does not obviate the fact that two relatively serious-minded, fairly popular local figures see trouble brewing in the Delta. Mitee, in fact, appeared genuinely dejected. It seems his nonviolent message is being supplanted by something much more muscular. With this, he risks becoming irrelevant.

11. (C) Also troubling to Mitee was the extent of accommodation he witnessed throughout the episode, with numerous military and government personnel either fully aware of the kidnappers' identities, activities and location and doing nothing to intervene, or turning a blind eye to the growing problem. The dented resolve of this veteran advocate of peaceful resistance is another troubling sign of a deterioration in the Delta that GON representatives have yet to acknowledge. End comment.

BROWNE